

Herd-Man or Altar-Man?

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NEW YORK 25, N. Y.



A ROODCROFT PAPER

Holy Cross Press

West Park, N. Y.

7TH THOUSAND

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DURING the recent war a heavy industry was moved into a small English town of about five hundred people. Over night the population was swollen to sixty-five thousand. Among these people there were working two religious groups and the Communists. At the Anglican parish church there were a thousand communicants, the Roman Catholics claimed five hundred and the Communists the same number. There was no Nonconformist work. The rest of the population remained unresponsive to any transcendent ideas. When a survey was made of the people's interests they were found to be, in order: sex, cinema (movies), dog racing and "the pools" (numbers racket).¹ In the United States

¹ The author is indebted to Dom Gregory Dix for this account.

about half of the population has gone on record with the national census as not being even nominally connected with any religious group. This section of population in our western civilization has received the title of mass-man. Without any deep cultural or spiritual roots, with practically no objective moral standards, the mass-man represents a dangerous leaven in society.

What is the origin of the mass-man? Perhaps it is safe to say that this is two-fold: the advent of industrialism and the philosophy of materialism. At the close of the eighteenth century we have the invention of power driven machinery and through the perfecting of these means of production during the last century and a half great numbers of men, women and even children have been attracted to urban centers to run machines producing great quantities of cheap commodities. This technical advance although bringing goods which had hitherto been luxuries to millions at amazing low prices also depersonalized the workers by making them but animated cogs in production.

Coupled with this there came the flowering of a

philosophical and ethical system which had its roots far back in the ground of early modern European history. Man and not God was the center of creation and all moral reference was to his needs or desires. The destiny of man was to be found in the temporal sphere alone. Evolution and the doctrine of progress became the great dogmas of the modern world and to doubt the truth of them was to bring the scornful cry of: obscurantist. Not only was theism as such discarded, but the objectivity of good and evil, right and wrong were called into question. Morals both public and private gradually became matters of expediency rather than inherent principles of life and thereby not only the Christian but the Classical heritage of western civilization was disavowed.

Again in politics there came a shift in emphasis: whereas with the burst of fervor in liberty at the close of the eighteenth century men were produced who had great sense of responsibility and initiative, the masses began to look upon liberty as a right which granted protection in the irresponsible pursuit of individual desires. Indeed Mazzini, the great

Italian statesman of the nineteenth century lamented the fact that rights rather than duty had been the ruling factor in democracy.²

Thus it is seen that in our time the mass-man is not only divorced from his relation to the soil with its ever present reminder that man has dependence on nature and a need for working in harmony with her, but an illusion has come in that nature exists to be exploited and brought into subjection without reference to natural law. Spiritual and moral values are reduced to such relativity that expediency and profits become the only criterion of action. Government is looked upon as the insurance agent to guarantee comfort and security with the minimum of responsibility of the citizen.

How has the mass-man prospered under these conditions? His livelihood being governed by the goods he produces, he has become dependent upon the output of commodities. If the markets

² Reginald Tribe, *The Christian Social Tradition* (London: S.P.C.K., 1935), p. 198.

are good he is assured of employment and steady wages; if there is economic depression he becomes the victim of unemployment. Instead of there being the rhythm of nature to which he has to accommodate himself, he is now determined by the rhythm of the production cycle.

The advent of the machine has made for impersonal relationships in industry. Usually the management is a large system involving many departments and offices, often at a distance from the factories. Furthermore the ownership is represented by a great number of stockholders who may live all over the country. The organization of labor is now undergoing a similar process and the workers are represented by union committees and heads who have little or no personal contact with the individuals whom they represent.

Thus the mass-man has become a cog in the vast machine of production. With impersonal business relations and great lack of insight into a future which he cannot plan he has developed a sense of futility and often a feeling akin to terror at the meaningless system in which he is involved. Con-

sequently much of his life outside of work is governed by the desire to escape from his plight. This probably plays a part in the mass popularity of baseball. There is a game or a series of games to be played. There is order and cooperation which has a definite beginning, purpose and end. One can attend a game or watch it over television. In the batter striking a ball and running for home base, the spectator lives vicariously and experiences, perhaps unconsciously the feeling of accomplishment. Again movies do the same thing, but on a more obvious level. The audience lives through the experiences of romance or heroism and finds release or escape in what is often an unreal or immoral solution of the problems of life. The popularity of "animated cartoons" illustrates the flight motive admirably. A small creature is pursued by a large one which the intended victim succeeds in outwitting or possibly harming in the end. The theme is practically the same in each production, but the delighted hum of expectancy which comes from the audience when the announcement of the feature is flashed on the screen shows the well-nigh

constant appeal of the subject.³ The popularity of mystery stories points to the desire for the solution of problems in an ordered and easy manner. Finally sex itself is divorced from its natural function and owing to the false stress it is given in popular fiction and in the movies it becomes a means of escape.

This dehumanization of the mass-man has left him the prey of mass movements such as national socialism as in Germany or Communism. A climatic low-pressure area is going to be filled by violent storm winds. Similarly the low-pressure area in which the mass-man lives invites the ingress of violent social movements. It is not an accident that Nazism in Germany seized the imaginations of people hungering to be taken hold of by a movement which had a program and a purpose, simply because they lacked any. That such a demonic movement should have taken hold of them was the result of there being no transcendent spiritual or moral standards which could effectively warn the

³ For this point the author is indebted to Erich Fromm, *Escape From Freedom* (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, Inc., 1941), p. 132.

people against the evil they were about to espouse.

Although the mass-man came into existence in the interest of increasing beneficial production, much the opposite takes place. Consumption does not take place as rapidly as production, unemployment or ruthless economic strife ending in wars takes place in order that markets may be gained. In the end the mass-man finds himself totally mobilized not for production but for destruction. The Tower of Babel becomes a reality in the modern world when secular achievement defeats itself. Materialism destroys materialism.

OVER against the mass-man there stands the convinced Christian, one who having the gift of new life in Christ takes to heart the obligation that has been laid on him. That life is not easy for he is in the world but not of the world. He is an integral part of sinful society and is influenced and conditioned by that membership. Often he must be party to what revulses his sensitivities. More often he finds that in making a decision which involves

his social activity he must choose between the lesser of two evils. Furthermore the course of action is not always clear and he must feel his way along. Social, economic and political injustices may weigh on his conscience, but the dilemma he can never avoid.

He cannot lose heart, to do that is to deny the providence of God who took the initiative in his redemption. He knows that God assumed human nature and came to earth in order that he might reclaim all creation to Himself. The sordid spectacle of sinful society did not force God to take a course of redemptive action from afar, but within the sphere of history He operated. "For he made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him."⁴

It was God clothed in our human nature who won the battle against sin, Satan and death. In the robe of mortal nature God incarnate won for us the reconciliation and paid the price of sin. In perfect obedience to the Father in all situations He merited forgiveness for us and restored man to

⁴ II Corinthians 5:21.

a new relation to the Father. The Cross proclaims the fact and the Resurrection makes clear that the offering is acceptable to the Father. Having ascended into heaven the Son continually pleads the merits of the Cross forever to the Father and through that human nature which the Son shares with us we have access to the throne of the Almighty.

It is through the Eucharistic Sacrifice enacted on our altars that the redemptive action is applied to those on earth. We offer, God consecrates by means of His appointed representatives and the faithful receive back those gifts which they have offered, now charged with the life of the God-Man. Indeed, the Christian who partakes of the Bread of Heaven is the Eucharistic-man.

First of all Eucharist means thanksgiving, thanksgiving for the grace which is already operative and which will in God's good time reconstitute all creation. Secondly Eucharistic life means thanksgiving for the role God has given us to play in bringing about this reconstruction. In penitence, yet in thanksgiving and adoration he approaches

God's table to plead on behalf of the world which neglects or refuses to recognize its relation to God the Creator, Sustainer and the Purpose of all things.

The Eucharistic-man exercises stewardship. God has placed him over inanimate and non-rational beings as lord and priest and he has his office to fulfill. He cannot be prodigal in his treatment of the things of nature which have been given over into his care, and yet how often have Catholics been unthoughtful of the proper use of the soil. That grains of wheat and grapes which make up the elements to be offered at the altar at the hands of the priest should be the reminder that the Eucharistic-man in the congregation has a responsibility for the products of the soil. But the oblations at the altar are not offered in their natural state. Grain and grape have been made into bread and wine, they have gone through a process in order that they may be used according to the ceremonial mandate of the Church. This illustrates to the Eucharistic-man that he has a responsibility for the manufacture of raw materials into the finished products. He bears a responsibility for the right

means of production. Although the Church cannot have an agricultural and industrial program set forth as hers officially, nevertheless she lays down the principles upon which Christians should base their actions in dealing with the problems of these orders.

Too often the services of the Church are looked upon as pious exercises whereby the faithful are withdrawn from the cares and toils of the world. In the quiet of the church they escape from the noise and confusion of life outside and contemplate the ordered worship of the sanctuary without reference to life. Devotion is individualistic and without reference to the problems besetting the world and the fact that redemption means reclaiming life in all its departments is overlooked; salvation is seen in withdrawal.

There offered on the altar is bread and wine. They represent the offering of the life of the priest who celebrates the Eucharist and the congregation which joins in the offering. But that is not all. The grain which makes up the Host grew somewhere in the Middle West. Men planted it and harvested

it when ripe. The machines which reaped and threshed the wheat were manufactured by other men. The wheat was taken to grain elevators, afterwards it was sold to mills and there ground into flour by other men. Some of the flour was bought by sisters who made the altar bread with irons made by other men. A similar history might be told of the background of the wine. All this labor is offered at the altar to be consecrated to God. Those men and women who worked towards producing the communion elements were in most cases quite unconsciously involved in a series of processes which produced what is offered at the altar. There was economic injustice, selfishness and lust involved in this production. Those cannot be offered, but have to be purged. Over sin God stands as judge. That which is contrary to the divine will must be remedied for God will not permit it to endure.

As the Eucharistic-man receives the Bread of Life, he receives back the product of his industry and that of his fellow men. They were poor offerings, but now they come back to him recharged with the power of God Himself. When the com-

municant goes forth from the altar and the Church back into the world he goes forth with responsibility. His prayers and efforts must be directed toward the reconstruction of life in all its departments. The mass-man drifts about like a stick floating with the tide; the Eucharistic-man faces the problems of his society and civilization charged with the power of God who promises: "Behold, I make all things new."⁵ There is the responsibility for the right use of nature, of production and for the soul of the mass-man to whom he must go as an evangelist to reclaim him to the God who created him, sustains him and with whom he was intended to find his beatitude for all eternity.

⁵ Revelation 21:5.

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